

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Chernenko's Comeback

Summary

Since resuming public appearances in September, Soviet General Secretary Konstantin Chernenko has projected an image of activism in foreign and domestic affairs and undercut the party's number two man, Mikhail Gorbachev. In light of Chernenko's chronic ill health, his resurgence may be only temporary. Still, he has displayed a physical and political vigor that may enable him to be more than the figurehead his detractors have claimed and require his rivals to maneuver adroitly to protect their positions. The decision not to hold a Central Committee plenum prior to the Supreme Soviet session in late November may reflect an effort to avoid leadership conflict for the time being over key personnel issues. If, however, Defense Minister Dmitriy Ustinov's illness is as serious as rumored, the Politburo may soon be faced with the potentially divisive task of designating his successor--an event that would provide a major test of Chernenko's political strength. [redacted]

1. Chernenko resumed public appearances on 5 September, with his physical health apparently on the mend, but still ailing politically. His absence from Moscow for several weeks had given rise to rumors that his death was imminent and that

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whether or not he recovered, his career was finished. While he was away from the capital, Gorbachev reportedly had chaired the weekly Politburo meetings and had received the protocol treatment normally accorded the party's leader. Chernenko probably perceived Gorbachev's prominence as politically threatening. It eventually contributed to a situation in which Pravda's editor publicly stated that Gorbachev could be described as a "second General Secretary." []

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Polishing Chernenko's Image

2. Chernenko's initial public appearances in September had all the earmarks of carefully staged efforts to demonstrate he was back on the job without exposing him to lengthy scrutiny or taxing his stamina. By month's end, however, he apparently had acquired sufficient physical strength to launch a campaign to regain the political initiative and strengthen his authority:

- On 25 September, he made a major speech to the Soviet Writers' Union that gave him the opportunity to refurbish his credentials as the party's chief ideological spokesman.
- On 27 September, he received a major award from his colleagues not required by normal Kremlin protocol and was identified as "Supreme Commander in Chief" by Ustinov--a title not accorded the General Secretary by another Politburo member since the Stalin era.
- On 5 October, he gave another major speech to the People's Control Committee, stressing his commitment to the discipline campaign and to economic reform.
- On 16 October, he granted an exclusive interview to a Washington Post correspondent that received extraordinary attention in the Soviet and Western press.
- On 23 October, he delivered the opening speech at a Central Committee plenum on agriculture, unveiling a land reclamation program that other speakers touted as his initiative.
- On 15 November, at a Politburo meeting attended by all the first secretaries of the Soviet republics, he gave a major speech on the economic plan for 1985 that was read aloud on the evening news and published the following day--unprecedented publicity for a Politburo speech.

- On 18 November, his answers to written questions from an NBC newsman were front-page news in Pravda.

More recently, Chernenko has been credited by the Western press with playing a major personal role in the scheduling of arms control discussions between US Secretary of State Shultz and Foreign Minister Gromyko. Moscow's decision to return to the bargaining table may indeed have required Chernenko's intervention, especially because, as reporting suggests, Gromyko has been the architect of the Kremlin's hardline stance. []

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Undercutting Gorbachev

3. The same period that has witnessed Chernenko's political comeback also has seen a series of moves that seem designed to call Gorbachev's political status into question. Like the moves to improve Chernenko's image, these slights to Gorbachev followed the General Secretary's reappearance by several weeks:

- Gorbachev ranked below rival party secretary Grigoriy Romanov in a Pravda leadership photograph of the Kremlin ceremony on 18 October marking Gromyko's 75th birthday.
- The television coverage of that ceremony focused on a quartet consisting of Chernenko, Gromyko, Romanov and Premier Nikolay Tikhonov, while Gorbachev was shown in the company of lower-ranking leaders.
- Soviet press accounts of the Central Committee plenum on agriculture on 23 October made no mention of Gorbachev, despite his status as the party's agricultural overseer.
- The absence of Gorbachev's name on the list of discussants of the 15 November Politburo meeting--a session important enough to require the presence of Politburo members based outside the Moscow area and regional party chiefs--suggested a deliberate effort, probably by Chernenko, to signal that his lock on the next succession was not assured. []

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A New Political Alignment?

4. These shifts in the relative standings of the party's number one and two men appear to signal a shift in the political arrangement that existed in the winter and spring of this year, when Chernenko and Gorbachev shared the limelight and, in the view of some observers, may have agreed to a sharing of power as well.

Chernenko appears to have revised the leadership equation in his favor by rallying his longtime "old guard" supporters, profiting from and perhaps encouraging Romanov's rivalry with Gorbachev, and convincing Ustinov and Gromyko that his sharing the limelight with Gorbachev was causing the Kremlin to appear divided in a difficult period of East-West relations:

- Tikhonov, like Chernenko, delivered major reports at the Central Committee plenum in October and at the expanded Politburo meeting in November, a political pairing that recalled their alignment in February, when Tikhonov nominated Chernenko to become General Secretary.
- Grishin, Kunayev, Shcherbitskiy and other "old guard" party bosses were major beneficiaries of the land reclamation program unveiled at the October plenum and apparently played active roles at the 15 November Politburo meeting that boosted Chernenko's leadership.
- Romanov has been given an increasing share of the political limelight and benefitted from Chernenko's apparent efforts to undercut Gorbachev.
- Ustinov's description of Chernenko as Supreme Commander in Chief was clearly designed to bolster the General Secretary's authority.
- The slight to Gorbachev at the ceremony in Gromyko's honor suggests the Foreign Minister's collusion in the effort to diminish the younger leader's status.

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Or An Unstable Leadership?

5. Even as Chernenko's fortunes have risen, there have been a number of anomalies that suggest he has not yet succeeded in forging a stable majority within the Soviet leadership:

- The removal of Nikolay Ogarkov from his positions of Chief of the General Staff and First Deputy Minister of Defense remains a puzzle; the early signs pointed to possible political disgrace,
- The decision not to convene a Central Committee plenum on the eve of the 27 November Supreme Soviet session is a break with past practice and may indicate that the

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Politburo wishes to defer discussion of high-level personnel changes until its members have resolved their differences. [REDACTED]

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Prospects

6. Chernenko's authority has clearly increased since his return to Moscow in September, and he apparently is in a stronger position than at any previous time in his tenure to play a leading role in directing Soviet policy. Although he apparently lacks the political strength Andropov enjoyed and certainly does not possess the power that Brezhnev ultimately accumulated, he has achieved an impressive political comeback. [REDACTED]

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7. Even so, the leadership situation remains in considerable flux, and the political environment that contributed to Chernenko's reemergence may not last. Among the developments that could lead to changes are:

- Chernenko's health could deteriorate and thereby substantially alter the leadership picture.
- The support of young ambitious leaders like Romanov, which is almost certainly only tactical, could evaporate with a change in the political wind.
- Policy issues could create cracks in political alliances. For example, Gromyko and Chernenko may not see eye to eye on US-Soviet relations, and resource allocation decisions always raise the potential for conflict.
- Ustinov, while willing to bolster Chernenko's authority, may object to moves against Gorbachev; last summer he appeared tacitly to have supported the younger leader's efforts to establish himself as Chernenko's heir, and the slights to Gorbachev have all occurred since Ustinov was taken sick. [REDACTED]

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8. More important, if Ustinov dies, a political vacuum would be created in the Kremlin that would be difficult to fill. No one has the stature, savvy, and experience to assume the political function he performs. The need to appoint a new Minister of Defense could create considerable conflict. The recent demotion of Ogarkov and the use of Marshal Sokolov as Ustinov's stand-in suggest that some leaders in the Kremlin--almost certainly including Chernenko and Ustinov--do not want a politically active military figure in this position. [REDACTED]

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9. It is still possible that Chernenko and Gorbachev can achieve a modus vivendi. The two leaders' views on East-West issues and resource allocation questions apparently are closer to each other's than they are to Romanov's, and each could benefit greatly from the other's support. Their working relationship might become smoother than before if Gorbachev now perceives the political dangers of getting too far out in front. [REDACTED]

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